



WISEWOMAN

Success Story 9 Massachusetts Women Help Each Other Follow a Healthy Path by Joining Social Support Group

One Woman in the Community Leads the Group, Builds Strong Support Among Members

Location Ware, Massachusetts

Focus Help underserved women in this rural town make lasting lifestyle changes that will reduce their risks for diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

Strategy A support group tailored to women's interests and needs gives women the tools they need to make healthy changes in their lives. It also empowers women and allows them to be leaders and role models for other women in the community.

Levels of Success Many interpersonal benefits have resulted. Women are motivated to make health changes as they are exposed to other women's successes and encouragement. The willingness of members to share and help each other in a peer-led group promotes a setting where women can share.

Results Each year, 250 women can be helped through the Women's Health Support Group, which serves Women's Health Network members including WISEWOMAN participants.

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Massachusetts Women Help Each Other Follow a Healthy Path by Joining Social Support Group

One Woman in the Community Leads the Group, Builds Strong Support Among Members

In rural Ware, Massachusetts, women needed help improving their health at a price they could afford. They also needed health advice. Out of these needs was born the Women's Health Support Group, started in October 2001. The Women's Health Network, which offers WISEWOMAN services, started the support group for network members. Each month, women attend group meetings for health tips and help in managing blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol. The women feel as if the support group truly belongs to them, and one woman has become the group's leader and champion.

Heather Ursini, RN, the Woman's Health Network Nurse Case Manager, first led the group and took the time to find out what the women wanted from these meetings. At first, she tried lectures and quickly saw this was not working. When they began asking for advice on reading food labels, and losing weight, Heather invited a registered dietitian to speak for 10 weeks at the meetings. The women were pleased that Heather had listened to them and tailored group meetings to reflect their interests. As a result, they began to share their stories with each other and invited their friends to join them.

More women returned each week because the meetings were interesting and fun. They learned how to prepare healthy, tasty foods through taste testing and recipe sharing. They also had access to helpful health information through the health library at Mary Lane Hospital, where they meet. Some women began to lose weight. They could see the physical, emotional, and spiritual changes in themselves and other women. Hands-on activities and meeting as a group to share ideas increased each woman's belief that a person can make changes in their lifestyle to promote a healthier life for them and their families.

The support group and the Women's Health Network refer women to each other as a way of ensuring that underserved women in Ware can get the care they need to be healthy and fit. Women in the support group receive a wide range of services offered by WISEWOMAN and other Women's Health Network programs. In turn, women participating in the network who have high cholesterol, high blood pressure, high blood glucose, or weight problems are referred to the Women's Health Support Group for social support and education. Women in the support group invite other women in the community to attend these sessions. At first, only 8 women attended regularly, but this has jumped to 12 women. The 10-week nutrition program draws about 20–25

women who are eager to learn about nutrition and healthy lifestyles.

WISEWOMAN participant Verna DeAngelis is a great example of how support groups can blossom when members become committed to the group and make it their own. After losing 60 pounds and seeing her cholesterol and glucose levels drop, Verna became a champion of the Women's Health Support Group. Over time, she began to open up at the meetings and share advice on how she had made these amazing changes in her life. She was then asked to lead a few sessions. She now leads the group.

"I knew I needed to make some changes in my life or I would follow in the footsteps of my mother's poor health. The WISEWOMAN program at the Women's Health Network identified my health problems and I began to make changes to better myself."

— Verna DeAngelis,
WISEWOMAN participant and
Women's Health Support Group champion

"I was motivated because of my high blood levels. My mother passed away because she was overweight, and had high cholesterol as well as high blood sugar," Verna recalled. "I also believe God was instrumental in my success. I often prayed for strength to make the changes necessary to maintain good health and to be a benefit to my community, my family, and friends. I have never felt stronger and more energetic!"

Importance of Change

Verna invites friends and co-workers to meetings, but she doesn't stop there. She recently invited a woman she works with to attend the meetings and took the woman under her wing. Verna is mentoring this co-worker as she works to lower her weight. This example shows how a group led by its members built social support for women enrolled in WISEWOMAN and the Women's Health Network.

Lessons Learned

- For your support group to succeed, members must be willing to share and help each other. Peer-led groups promote a setting where it is easy for women to share.
- Organize fun, hands-on activities such as taste testings and recipe swaps, where women can learn how to prepare healthy meals.
- Realize that as women see changes in themselves and others, they become even more motivated to make healthy changes.
- Take steps to ensure that women feel their interests are driving the support group. When women feel that the meetings belong to them, their interest increases.
- To boost attendance and participation, ask women what they want, listen to them, and change the format to reflect their needs and concerns.